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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL UZ

SUBJECT: UZBEK FOREIGN MINISTER: HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT MAY SET BACK RELATIONS AGAIN

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 12, the Ambassador was summoned to a meeting with Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in response to the release of the 2007 U.S. State Department Human Rights Report on March 11. Norov was swift to condemn the report, which he characterized as "an unfriendly act" and a return to the use of "double standards" in the United States' relations with Uzbekistan. He argued that the report was subjective, as it cited what he claimed to be unreliable internet reports and human rights activists who lacked credibility. Most significantly, Norov suggested that one result of the report's release is that President Karimov may now decide to decline an invitation to attend the upcoming NATO Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) summit in Bucharest on April 2 - 4. The Ambassador reminded the Foreign Minister that the current report only covered up to the end of calendar year 2007, and therefore did not include the small but significant steps on human rights the government had undertaken so far in 2008, such as the amnesty of some political prisoners and the agreement with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on prison visits. The Ambassador emphasized to Norov that if this continued then the 2008 report would likely be more positive. More urgently, the Ambassador noted that both the EU and the U.S. were facing decisions in late spring on possible punitive measures, and the recent progress, if reinforced by significant additional steps, could influence these decisions. In the end, Norov's negative reaction was probably more Central Asian-face saving than genuine indignation over the depiction of Uzbekistan in the report, which differed little from previous years and should have come as no surprise. End summary.

FOREIGN MINISTER QUICKLY CONDEMNS REPORT

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¶2. (C) On March 12, the Ambassador was summoned to a meeting with Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in response to the release of the 2007 U.S. State Department Human Rights Report on March 11. Norov was swift to condemn the report, which he characterized as "an unfriendly act," "counterproductive," and a return to the use

of "double standards" in the United States' relations with Uzbekistan. He argued that the Human Rights Report was subjective, as it cited what he claimed to be unreliable internet reports and human rights activists who lacked credibility. Most significantly, Norov suggested that one fall-out from the report's release is that President Karimov may now decide to decline an invitation to attend the upcoming NATO Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) summit in Bucharest on April 2 - 4.

**¶3.** (C) Norov noted that President Karimov had been made aware of the release of the report, which he said also had been reported on by international news outlets reaching Uzbekistan, including the satellite news station Euronews. During the meeting, the Ambassador handed to Norov a copy of the Human Rights Report and a Russian translation.

SAYS REPORT LIKELY TO BOLSTER RUSSIA'S HAND IN UZBEKISTAN

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**¶4.** (C) Norov noted that relations with the United States were improving "step-by-step," but warned that the report's release had the potential to set back relations again and strengthen Russia's hand in the region. While the United States criticized Uzbekistan's human rights record, Norov said that Russia was seeking to improve relations with Uzbekistan. In particular, Norov noted the Russian company Gazprom had signed an agreement favorable to Uzbekistan this week, guaranteeing that the company would purchase gas from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan at "European prices." Throughout the meeting, Norov said that his government simply "did not understand why" the United States was seeking to set back relations with Uzbekistan again through undue criticism of its human rights record.

SAYS UZBEKISTAN OPEN TO HONEST DISCUSSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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**¶5.** (C) Norov said that his government was open to honest discussion on human rights with the United States and non-governmental organizations, claiming that many "international experts" had praised recent moves by the government, such as Uzbekistan's abolishment of the death penalty and adoption of a "habeas corpus" law transferring the power to issue arrest warrants from prosecutors to the judiciary. He also stated that foreign experts from South Korea, Pakistan, and "other Muslim" countries had printed articles praising Uzbekistan's December 2007 presidential elections as free and fair.

**¶6.** (C) On the other hand, Norov claimed that individuals who had criticized Uzbekistan's human rights record displayed little knowledge about the realities on the ground in Uzbekistan. He cited Human Rights Watch Director Kenneth Roth and International Crisis Group (ICG) Vice-President Alain Deletroz by name, claiming that their organization's reports were biased and much harsher on Uzbekistan than neighboring countries. Norov appeared to take particular offense at an International Crisis Group report (released in August 2007) which characterized Uzbekistan as a potential failed state, noting that political instability was much worse in neighboring Tajikistan. In contrast, Norov maintained that preserving political stability was one of the chief goals and major human rights accomplishments of the Uzbek government. Norov also questioned the objectivity of a February 14 ICG report which blamed Uzbek security services for the murder of Kyrgyz journalist (and ethnic Uzbek) Alisher Saipov in October 2007 (Note: Page six of the ICG report implies that the U.S. should have actively supported efforts to topple the Karimov regime after Andijon in 2005. End note.) He also criticized as biased the reporting of local human rights activist Surat Ikramov by name.

CLAIMS U.S. IS HYPOCRITICAL IN REGARDS TO TORTURE

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**¶7.** (C) Norov suggested that the United States was being

hypocritical in its claims that torture was still practiced in Uzbek prisons. Norov brought up President Bush's veto of legislation that would have made the use of certain interrogation tactics illegal. He denied that torture occurred in Uzbek prisons, something which he said was even forbidden during the Soviet era. He also stated that Uzbekistan's incarceration rate compared favorably with that of neighboring countries and the United States. The Ambassador drew on Department's guidance to reply that President Bush's veto of the legislation in no way indicated that the United States tolerated the use of torture.

ARGUES OTHER STATES HAVE MUCH WORSE HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

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¶8. (C) Norov also argued that Uzbekistan fared worse in the report than other states which had what he believed to be much worse human rights records, including China, which Norov claimed executed thousands of prisoners a year. In comparison to its neighbors (which he did not name), Norov also claimed that Uzbekistan did not rely upon public relations firms to bolster its image in the West (Oxus Gold, which is connected to the President's daughter, paid the Washington Post to recently run a full-spread advertisement on Uzbekistan).

RAISES RECENT INTERVIEW WITH U.S. AMBASSADOR TO KYRGYZSTAN

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¶9. (C) In general, Norov appeared to be most upset that Uzbekistan was viewed less favorably in terms of human rights than its neighbors. Norov provided the Ambassador with a copy of a March 8 story from the Neweurasianet website covering a recent interview conducted by the Gazeta.kg

website with U.S. Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan. Norov claimed that in the interview, Ambassador Yovanovitch called Kyrgyzstan the leading democratic state in Central Asia, which Norov firmly disputed (Comment: Reading the article, it is clear that Ambassador Yanokovich's words were taken out of context by Norov. As reported by Neweurasianet, Ambassador Yovanovitch appeared to be stating that Kyrgyzstan had long been in the forefront of democratic progress in Central Asia, but that it had begun to backtrack after recent events, including the recent flawed Parliamentary election. End comment.) Norov suggested that the United States' "praise" for Kyrgyzstan was political and directly linked to the Kyrgyz government's continued willingness to grant the U.S. military access to the Manas air force base, which he said was in jeopardy.

SAYS UZBEKISTAN SEEKS TO IMPROVE RELATIONS WITH TURKMENISTAN, DESPITE ITS HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

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¶10. (C) In regards to Turkmenistan, Norov noted that the Turkmen government has begun to seek an end to its long isolation under President Berdymuhamedov, but otherwise it has not substantially improved its human rights record. Specifically, he argued that Turkmenistan still refused to allow its Uzbek minority to open up cultural centers or study their native language in schools. Despite Turkmenistan's lack of human rights progress, Norov complained it was getting a "pass" from the U.S. while Uzbekistan was slammed (Comment: Norov observed that President Karimov had publicly spoken well of Turkmenistan during President Berdymuhamedov's March 10 - 11 state visit to Tashkent, only in order to lay the foundation for, and encourage, positive steps on reform. The irony that Uzbekistan might serve as a source of guidance on reform was clearly lost on Norov. End comment.)

DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS AND COMMUNAL RIGHTS

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¶11. (C) In criticizing the report, Norov argued that the West used a different definition of human rights, which emphasized individual rights, than Asian countries like Uzbekistan, which emphasize communal and economic rights.

Norov argued that Uzbekistan had a different culture and would never accept making individual rights paramount over one's duty to family and community. In contrast, Norov argued that the Uzbek government had, by its own definition, a solid human rights record, as it provided for political stability and the economic welfare of its citizens.

AMBASSADOR'S REPLY TO NOROV'S CLAIMS

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¶12. (C) During the meeting with Norov, the Ambassador reminded the Foreign Minister that the current report only covered up to the end of calendar year 2007, and therefore did not include the small but significant steps on human rights the government had undertaken so far in 2008, including the amnesty of some political prisoners and the agreement with ICRC on prison visits. He emphasized to Norov that if this continued then the 2008 report would likely be more positive. More urgently, the Ambassador noted that both the EU and the U.S. were facing decisions in late spring on possible punitive measures, and the recent progress, if reinforced by significant additional steps, could influence these decisions. The Ambassador cited more amnesties, implementation of the agreement with ICRC, and unblocking of additional websites, as further steps the government could take. He encouraged the GOU to develop a strategy involving more progress on human rights as well as greater transparency. In particular, he suggested that inviting a couple of serious Western journalists into Uzbekistan could result in more nuanced coverage of the country in the international press.

AMBASSADOR ANNOUNCES REPORTS RELEASE TO MFA ON MARCH 10

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¶13. (C) The meeting with Norov on March 12 followed a meeting on March 11 that the Ambassador arranged with MFA Americas Division Chief Mamajanov to notify the Uzbek government about the release of the Human Rights Report in Washington later that day. The Ambassador simply told Mamajanov that he expected the report to be similar to last year's hard hitting report. The Ambassador pointed out that the clamp-down on travel by Embassy officers last fall had not helped the Uzbek case. Mamajanov regretted that the improved dialogue on human rights that had gotten underway last fall following the Ambassador's arrival had apparently not produced more progress on the human rights report, but declared that the GOU was ready to work with us on a forward-looking strategy to improve the reality and perception of Uzbekistan's human rights situation.

COMMENT

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¶14. (C) Norov's negative reaction to release of the Human Rights Report was probably more Central Asian-face saving than genuine indignation over its depiction of Uzbekistan. The Uzbeks are rightfully slammed in the annual Human Rights Report each year, and there is no reason why they should have expected the report to be any different this year, despite the modest (and continuing) progress it has made since January. Much of what Norov told the Ambassador was nothing new and has been long recycled by the Uzbeks in meetings with U.S. government officials over the years. What is unclear is whether, and to what extent, the Uzbeks will retaliate to what they labeled "an unfriendly act."

NORLAND